

PLACE BRANDING PROCESS: ANALYSIS OF POPULATION AS CONSUMERS OF DESTINATION IMAGE

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In tourist marketing and branding strategies considering residents' perceptions is essential as promotional actions must convey an image that adequately represents the place and its inhabitants. This research considers that a destination brand cannot be successful if the residents' perspective is not taken into account. Thanks to a quantitative study of the case of Zaragoza (Spain), a model of research is presented to analyse the residents' brand attitude, perception of usefulness, and perceived image. The results confirm that the inhabitants' attitude is the main variable to get a good destination image through a place branding strategy, which will depend on the brand's perceived usefulness. Thus, the present paper verifies the importance of considering residents' perspective in destination image management due to they are both the first producers and consumers of their own place image.

Keywords: *Marketing, branding, image, residents, identity, destination*

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, globalization, easy access to information, the presence of low cost travel companies and the economic crisis have created a highly competitive tourist market, in which the different destinations try to convey a good image – whether new or strengthened – in order to be distinctive and positioned well in the target market. In this sense, place marketing strategies have been making efforts to develop an emotional relationship with the consumer (Murphy, Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2007). Within these actions, place branding is considered a key tool in destination marketing, providing a strong image of the place in which not only visitors but also investors and residents have become the main targets.

However, despite the effort for an increased awareness concerning the population's perceptions and attitudes, the perspective of residents is overlooked in favor of the common good and investors' interests (Renda *et al.*, 2014). As explained by Kavaratzis *et al.* (2010), residents are commonly treated in the relevant literature as a target market of place marketing and place branding efforts just in relation to the attraction of new residents, instead of considering them an active part of the whole marketing and branding process. In fact, according to these authors, the interest about how citizen's participation enhances the quality and the effectiveness of place marketing strategies is growing.

Previous studies have considered residents perspective at this respect. For example, Freire (2009) revealed that local people are relevant for a destination brand-building process as a distinguishing element between place brands. Zenker and Petersen (2010) took a step forward by analyzing how residents' identification is important to form a suitable place identity. The study of Zenker *et al.* (2010), on the other hand, analyzes the perception of residents (among other groups) as a target of a city brand. Nevertheless, none of them focus on how the perceptions and attitudes of the population towards the place brand can influence its effectiveness.

Similarly to organizations, also within destinations, the brand identity can guide stakeholders' behaviour to a positive attitude, but only if they believe in those brand values (Bregoli, 2012).

For the conveyed image to be congruent with destination's reality, considering the subjective vision of the residents is especially relevant. In order to ensure the social and cultural sustainability of the destination (Florek, 2012) and the acceptance of the brand (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013), it is essential that in the process of *place branding* there are no obvious dissociations between the image that the Government wants to convey and the internal image perceived by the inhabitants, which arises organically.

Thus, the present study is based on the hypothesis that the place brand will improve the image only if the population has positive perceptions of it. We use perceived usefulness (PU) and attitude as variables to examine these perceptions and the link with image. This relationship is analysed through a case study, the city brand of Zaragoza (Spain), to derive conclusions and implications that could be useful to other destinations. Thus, a quantitative analysis was developed to study: (1) the perceptions of the residents of Zaragoza in relation to the usefulness that the brand and associated promotional actions have for their city in terms of potential benefits, (2) their attitudes towards the brand, and (3) how these two variables – PU and attitude – influence the image of the city.

RESIDENTS AS CONSUMERS OF DESTINATION IMAGE

According to Luque, Del Barrio, Ibáñez & Rodríguez (2009), place image is formed from the messages that the different consumers receive about a destination. Therefore, the communication of the image should be not only external but also internal, due to the destination's need to be not only attractive but also supported by its population (De Elizagarate, 2008).

Place image is not only derived from the destination's objective resources and values, but also from the subjective perceptions that different social groups hold about it, especially depending on the relationship they have with the place, so the perceptions of residents and non-residents will differ. This context becomes more complex because residents are consumers and part of the product at the same time, which makes destination image management a fundamental task (Pike, 2004).

This research focuses specifically on the importance of residents' perceptions in the establishment of a place branding strategy, since governments can manage and modify residents' attitudes for the public

good through the branding process (Merrilees, Miller, & Herrington, 2009). The challenge in communicating the brand is joining the different images that the consumers have about the destination and the image that the tourist department wants to convey as a positioning tool of the strategic plan (Marrero & Tanda, 2003). Therefore, the brand should adequately represent the identity of the residents, whilst also trying to attract the attention of visitors. If the tourist department conveys an image which does not match residents' perception, there will be dissociation between the place and its population because, as described by Hankinson (2004), inhabitants are also consumers of the brand of their place of residence. This will have a negative effect on the internal consumption of the image due to a lack of coherence between the three key elements that authors such as Cheshmehzangi and Heat (2012) adduce to the place branding process: image, uniqueness and authenticity. In particular, there is no authenticity if the population's perception is not reflected. Focusing too heavily on tourists can create conflict and ultimately alienate local groups (Beckman *et al.*, 2013). If the tourist department does not incorporate the inhabitants' perception of the brand developed in their territory, it can potentially destroy the culture of that place and therefore destroy one of the key features of the brand.

THE CASE OF ZARAGOZA

Zaragoza, the capital of Aragón, is situated in the north-east of Spain, being equidistant from the cities of Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Bilbao. According to Seisdedos (2012), with a population of nearly 700,000 inhabitants, its middling size makes it a perfect city for a case study, which also motivated the IE Business School¹ to choose Zaragoza's city brand as a case study to analyze the future keys in city marketing.

In 2008 the International Exposition "Expo 2008" took place in Zaragoza with the theme of "Water and Sustainable Development". Thanks to Expo 2008, but even before that, the city has experienced changes at every level: urban, infrastructural, economic and social. This has affected the image of the city and its citizens both nationally and internationally. Thus, the local public administration considered it the perfect opportunity to initiate a strategic city branding project.

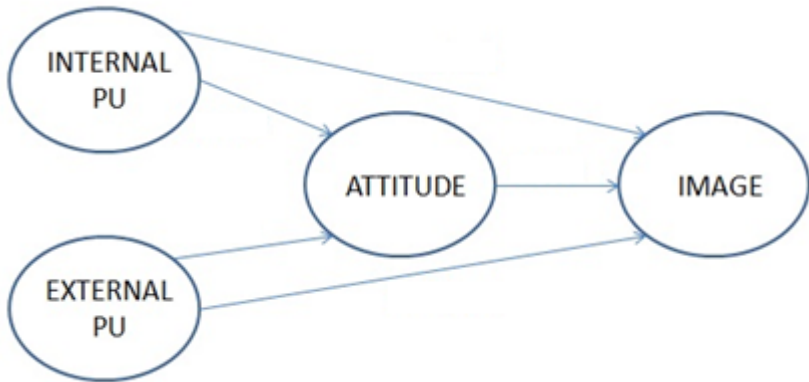
¹<http://www.ie.edu/business-school/>

According to the local administration, the city needed a brand that could convey its transformation, identify and empathize with the citizens, attract potential residents, tourists and investors, and articulate in a coherent and homogeneous way. These aspects were the central key of a Strategic Plan of Communication and Marketing, aimed at helping Zaragoza to reach different targets and markets (Zaragoza Global, 2009). The city brand was intended to attract talent, investment, tourism, events, etc., but also to improve the internal image so that the inhabitants would identify with the “new Zaragoza”, recognizing the changes and feeling proud of their city. Thus, the local administration considered place branding as the key tool of city marketing to attain its objectives.

THEORETICAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

As explained, the present study considers that residents' PU related to the brand and its campaigns will determine their attitudes towards it and, consequently, it will affect the image of the city. Thus, the model of research (Figure 1) is presented.

Figure 1. Model of research



As the model shows, internal PU and external PU are considered separately. This approach was adopted because the actions developed inside and outside the territory have very different goals: the former focus on increasing the participation and involvement of the population within their place of residence, whereas the latter aim to promote the territory as a destination. Thus, it seems reasonable that inhabitants' PU will differ according to the type of actions.

The first definition of PU was provided by Davis (1989) who, focusing on a labour environment, defined it as “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance” (p. 320). Thus, an object will have a high PU if the user considers that it means an improvement in the development of his/her work. Adapting the concept to destination branding, PU could be defined as the extent to which residents consider that a brand representing their place of residence provides benefits which could not be achieved without the existence of that brand and associated actions.

The theoretical importance of PU as a determinant of behaviour is found in several lines of research (Davis, 1989). According to Bhattacharjee (2001), it has an influence on population acceptance behaviours. Therefore, if the inhabitants do not perceive that the development of a destination brand implies benefits for their place of residence, i.e. if they do not

perceive its usefulness, they will have a negative attitude toward the brand and vice versa, indicating a direct relationship between the two variables. Both the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Bhattacharjee, 2000) posit the direct influence of PU on attitude.

In the field of social psychology, attitude is defined as the predisposition to act in a certain way in the presence of an object or a kind of objects (Shaver, 1987), whereas from the marketing perspective it is defined rather as a representation of the favourable or unfavourable evaluation of the object in question (Ajzen, 1991). Thus, brand attitude can be defined as the general evaluation of the brand by consumers (Wilkie, 1986, as cited in Keller, 1993). Although different brand attitude models have been presented, Keller's (1993) model is widely accepted. This model holds that brand attitudes depend on a group of associated characteristics and on their perceived benefits. Therefore, a positive perception of the brand – strengthened by evident improvements in the territory – can have a positive effect on place image (Trueman *et al.*, 2004).

Thus, considering that the branding actions developed within the territory and those developed outside the territory are differently perceived, and considering that PU will influence the attitude, the first hypotheses proposed are as follows:

H1: The PU of internal actions developed in relation to a destination brand has a positive effect on attitudes toward that brand.

H2: The PU of external actions developed in relation to a destination brand has a positive effect on attitudes toward that brand.

As previously mentioned, attitude determines behaviour and it is also a mediator between PU and behaviour, which in this research is that of the residents. From the marketing perspective, behaviour can be analysed through purchase intention or brand loyalty, but in destination branding the situation is somewhat different. The residents – as consumers – do not exhibit such behaviours as they do not engage in a similar decision-making process, nor do they “buy” any product or service. Thus, the analysis of their behaviour is closer to affective associations about what the brand represents: their place of residence. A good city image is not an abstract aesthetic phenomenon (Nasar, 1997). Images consist of networks of associations about places, products, objects or other people (Atkinson *et al.*, 1987). As a result, the image is analysed on the basis of PU and brand

attitude, a positive image being the final objective of any place branding strategy (Govers, 2011).

A good image depends on the evaluation of people who regularly evaluate the city (Nasar, 1997). According to Avraham (2004) the strategies to improve a city image should be: encouraging visits to the city; hosting spotlight events; turning negative characteristics into positive characteristics; changing the city's name, logo or slogan; cultivating the residents' local pride; solving the problem that led to the formation of the negative image; delivering counter-stereotypical messages; ignoring the stereotype; acknowledging the negative image; and geographic association or separation in the campaign. So we can see that residents' local pride is an important factor to have a good city image.

The different levels of *sense of place* felt by the various inhabitants in a place have been analysed and empirically verified by several environmental psychology studies (Hernández *et al.*, 2007; Lalli, 1992; Lynch, 1960; Stedman, 2002). Variation in the perception of image is a consequence of the complex and subjective process of the creation and internalization of the symbolic meanings that every person develops in relation to his or her place of residence (Belanche, 2012). This complexity in the analysis of destination image is increased by the wide range of factors that may influence its creation (Richards & Wilson, 2004).

On the basis of the above arguments and adapting them to this analytic context, the following hypotheses are proposed in relation to the consequences of the main variables:

H3: The PU of internal actions developed in relation to a destination brand has a positive effect on the internal image of the territory.

H4: The PU of external actions developed in relation to a destination brand has a positive effect on the internal image of the territory.

H5: Positive attitudes toward a destination brand have a positive effect on the internal image of the territory.

METHOD

Study design and sampling procedure

A quantitative research design was developed in order to collect opinions and perceptions of the city brand of Zaragoza from the point of

view of the residents. The data collection was developed through a self-administered online questionnaire created at the website www.surveymonkey.com, which allows the elaboration and the storage of the obtained responses. With the aim of getting a relevant number of responses, the questionnaire was spread applying the snowball sample method, and the participants shared the questionnaire through social networks and email, getting a greater and more varied number of participants.

Thus, data were collected from a sample of 450 residents in Zaragoza. Sampling stratification was applied, with random selection within each stratum. The strata groups were selected to give a broad demographic cross-section of residents for the city, according to the current distribution of the population related to age and gender (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample characteristics

	<i>Sample (%)</i>	<i>Population (%)</i>
<i>Age</i>		
18–30	30.7	24.7
31–40	20.3	18.2
41–50	17.6	16.6
51–65	18.9	19.9
> 65	12.5	20.6
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	49.3	47.7
Female	50.7	52.3

A literature review was undertaken to select the most appropriate measures for this analysis (Appendix 1). Thus, residents were asked to score the extent to which they agreed with different statements related to the perceived benefits of the brand in their city, their attitude toward Zaragoza's city brand and the current image they held of their city of residence. A seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) was employed.

As described, the selected test persons for this main study were residents of Zaragoza, regardless of whether they had been born in the city or not.

They were contacted through different social networks with the request to participate in the survey.

A total of 450 respondents (49.3% female) took part in the online survey. The sample consists of 51% of residents aged 18–40 years old, 17.6% aged 41–50 and 31.4% aged 51 and over, as displayed in Table 1.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Establishing the validity and reliability of scales is fundamental in confirming the results of the research. Thus, exploratory analysis of validity and reliability was undertaken using the statistical software SPSS Statistics 19 and the software SmartPLS 2.0 for the development of the models.

RELIABILITY OF SCALES

The reliability of scales indicates the degree of trustworthiness, i.e. the probability of the results being different depending on the moment in which the research is developed, by studying the degree of random error (Sánchez & Sarabia, 1999). Cronbach's alpha coefficient is the most widely used measure of scale reliability (Nunnally, 1978). A scale is reliable when its items are highly correlated, indicating that the items are measuring the same concept. This allows the degree of reliability to be measured in relation to a minimum value, which in this study is 0.7 (Cronbach, 1970; Nunnally, 1978). All the constructs used in this research exceed the minimum value, although for both internal and external PU items 5 were deleted to confer greater reliability. Reliability was also analysed through item-total correlations (Bagozzi, 1981), measuring the correlation of each item with the other items in the same scale. The correlation has to be greater than 0.3 (Casaló, 2008) and in this case, no items had to be deleted as they all exceeded the minimum value.

The unidimensionality of the scales, i.e. the weighting of the items in the proposed factors, was also evaluated. Avarimax rotation in factor exploratory analysis was developed (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998) using two indicators: Bartlett's test of sphericity, which has to be 0.0, and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test, the value of which should be above 0.6 (Hutcheson & Sofroniu, 1999). All the variables met the required criteria.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF CONSTRUCTS

The reliability of the constructs was verified, as recommended by authors such as Jöreskog (1971). The minimum value adopted for Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.6 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) and all the variables reached a value higher than 0.9.

Analysis of the validity of constructs examines the correspondence between a conceptualization theoretically established and the proposed scale to quantify it (Flavián & Lozano, 2003). Both convergent and discriminant validity were analysed. Convergent validity concerns whether the items of the different scales fit the construct theoretically proposed and is confirmed if the factorial weight of each indicator exceeds 0.5 and if it is significant at 0.1 (Sanzo *et al.*, 2003), measured through the average variance extracted (AVE) (Ping, 2004). An appropriate level of convergent validity is represented by an AVE value above 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and it can be confirmed that all the constructs in this study are satisfactory, having values above 0.7.

Discriminant validity indicates the distance between constructs without a theoretical link. For this analysis, the AVE values (displayed diagonally in Table 2) are compared to the squared correlations between constructs (the rest of the values displayed in Table 2); these must be less than the AVE to confirm discriminant validity according to Rea *et al.* (2006). The results show that all the pairs of constructs meet both requirements, as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Discriminant validity analysis

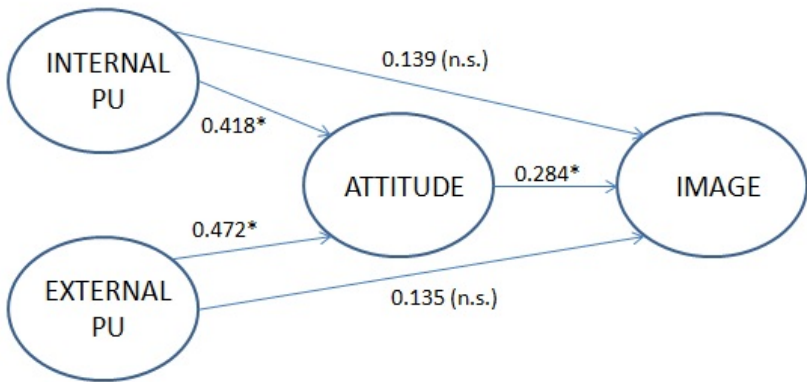
CONSTRUCT	ATTITUDE	IMAGE	EXTERNAL PU	INTERNAL PU
ATTITUDE	0.7873			
IMAGE	0.2479	0.7995		
EXTERNAL PU	0.6226	0.2152	0.8829	
INTERNAL PU	0.6023	0.2128	0.5745	0.8360

RESULTS

Having established the validity and reliability of the scales, the proposed hypotheses are tested. With that objective, a model was developed (Figure

1) using SmartPLS 2.0. Using a bootstrapping technique, the significance of the coefficients was tested using 500 samples. For the sake of thoroughness, only hypotheses with a minimum significance of 0.05 were accepted, meaning that H3 and H4 are rejected.

Figure 2. Model of research (results)



Note: * significant at 0.01; (n.s.) not significant.

The two first hypotheses referred to the effect of PU on brand attitude and the results demonstrate the existence of a positive and significant relationship between PU – both internal ($\beta = 0.418$; $p < 0.01$) and external ($\beta = 0.472$; $p < 0.01$) – and attitude, thus confirming H1 and H2.

Regarding H3, H4 and H5, related to the effects of the variables on image, the results vary. On the one hand, the effect of the PU of brand actions is not particularly significant ($\beta = 0.139$; $p > 0.05$ for internal PU, $\beta = -0.135$; $p > 0.05$ for external PU), resulting in H3 and H4 being rejected. This may be due to the indirect effect of PU on place image through attitude, which acts as a mediating variable between them. In fact, attitude does have a positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.284$; $p < 0.01$) on place image, supporting H5. This confirms that the PU of branding actions does not

improve inhabitants' image of their place of residence if their brand attitude is not improved, but that attitude is influenced by PU and does improve the image of the territory. In order to prove this indirect effect, Sobel's (1982) test was carried out, the results of which indicate that attitude is a mediating variable in the model (Table 3).

Table 3. Sobel test results

	INTERNAL PU	EXTERNAL PU
Sobel test statistic	2.316	2.634
One-tailed probability (significance)	$p < 0.05$	$p < 0.01$

To confirm this mediation effect, Baron and Kenny's (1986) regression approach was applied. The results (Appendix 2) confirm the total mediation of attitude over internal and external PU and image, verifying the aforementioned indirect effect.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present paper contributes to the knowledge of the influence of residents' perception in the image of a territory by providing an analysis of the factors determining the inhabitants' acceptance of a territorial brand and its effects on the internal image of the place, which will be transmitted into the global image. For this purpose, the usefulness of the brand as perceived by the residents was analysed according to the potential benefits for the city.

We also examined brand attitude, focusing on how the two variables – PU and attitude – influence the image of the city. In this process, a new model of quantitative analysis has been proposed and applied in a case study of the perceptions of the residents of Zaragoza (Spain) concerning the city's brand, aiming to verify the five hypotheses presented.

It has been shown that the perception of usefulness in relation to brand actions confers an improvement in residents' brand attitudes, which also improves the image of the city (Bregoli, 2012). In this respect, our study contributes by confirming that PU itself does not affect the image if it is not through a change in brand attitude, i.e. the attitudes that people have toward

the brand of their place of residence directly influence their perceptions of the territory (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013). These results verify that a destination brand can have an influence on the image of the territory if the residents perceive it positively; this will depend on the extent to which they think the brand is useful in their place of residence.

Regarding the theoretical implications, this study contributed to the analysis of the repercussions of a place branding strategy in the internal image of the territory. Numerous authors advocate the importance of residents' participation and opinion in the branding process (Renda et al., 2014; Kavaratzis et al., 2010; Freire, 2009; Zenker and Petersen, 2010; Zenker et al., 2010); however, there is still a lack of analysis focused on the inhabitants' perception and influence, as explained. The proposed analysis model takes a step forward in relation to the factors that can influence the brand perception and attitude. The general studies of this line of research focus on the variables that can make an effect on the consumers' decision process (Hernández et al., 2007; Lalli, 1992; Lynch, 1960; Stedman, 2002) instead of just considering their perception, which will determine their attitude. In that respect, a novel contribution of this work is the use of the variable PU regarding a brand, instead of a product or service. The results of our research confirm that it is a variable that can be used in relation to a territorial brand, having a high influence in the brand attitude, which is essential for inhabitants' acceptance.

This paper also presents implications for management. As stated, place branding is one of the most selected tools to manage the territorial image. The advantages of creating a brand represent a suitable initiative to face current Government's challenges, including the motivation of the residents to feel proud, attached and involved with the place they live in. To engage residents, it is necessary to take into account the perceptions of the image of the destination (inner image) held by the local population (Beckman, *et al.* 2013). The participation of the inhabitants plays an important role (Lee, 2011; Paganoni, 2012) during the branding process and in some of the promoting actions. Thanks to that participation, the place brand's values also reverts to the local population's empowerment (Lee, 2011), assuring the socio-cultural sustainability of the place (Florek, 2012).

Nowadays, people tend to mistrust Government's activities and investments that involve uncertainty or do not show real results or visual improvements; such is the case of marketing and branding actions. Our

research analyzes the variables that help residents to get a positive brand attitude, demonstrating that the PU is a strong influencing aspect. The residents need to perceive that these new public initiatives mean any benefit for their place of residence to be willing to appreciate them. The perception of usefulness reflects a complex concept whose interpretation might vary depending on the inhabitants' expectations and demands (Belanche, 2012).

Public administration as a coordinator of all the destination's stakeholders is essential to ensure effective destination branding, being the real source of competitive advantage, since it allows destinations to differentiate themselves (Bregoli, 2012). However, as it has been analyzed, coordination is also needed in the process of linking the dimensions of commitment to the brand and citizenship behavior of the brand, ensuring the internal brand strength.

Finally, this work has some limitations that on the other hand open some avenues for future research. This research refers to the developed study being addressed to residents in Zaragoza (Spain), meaning that any generalization of the findings should require caution. Results could be different in other territories, since inhabitants could behave differently depending on their culture, country or the general attitude of the people toward Government's actions. In this sense, the replication of this study in other territories could reinforce the validity of both management contributions and findings. Even more interesting could be comparing perceptions and brand attitudes through cross-cultural analysis. Secondly, considering the multidisciplinary nature of the topic, many perspectives could be taken, although they fall into other fields of study. For instance, research in public management, sociology or political marketing could be also devoted to analyze these phenomena. Although this work refers occasionally to these aspects along the text, a great effort is needed to deliberately exclude extensive interpretations that distract or escape from the principal discourse flow. It would be helpful for future research to compile studies from different perspectives in order to provide readers with broader and more complete views of the objects of analysis.

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APPENDIX 1

Measurement scales

CONSTRUCT	ITEMS
Internal perceived usefulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I think internal actions are interesting - I think internal actions are useful - I think internal actions are necessary for Zaragoza - I think investing in internal actions is advisable - I think internal actions are beneficial for the city
External perceived usefulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I think external actions are interesting - I think external actions are useful - I think external actions are necessary for Zaragoza - I think investing in external actions is advisable - I think external actions are beneficial for the city
Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The city brand is a good idea - The city brand is necessary for the city - The city brand can benefit the city - I think the city brand is benefiting the city - The city brand conveys a positive feeling - The city brand develops interesting actions - I have a positive opinion of the city brand
Image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I love to live in Zaragoza - I think Zaragoza is worth knowing - I think Zaragoza is a good city to live in

APPENDIX 2

Attitude's mediating effect (internal PU)